

We asked more than 700 Australian teens where they bought their vapes. Here's what they said

September 27 2022, by Christina Watts, Becky Freeman and Sam Egger



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Teen vaping has been in the news, with reports of [rapidly increasing use](#) and [illegal sales](#) of e-cigarettes.

As a Four Corners [documentary](#) on ABC TV earlier this year showed, parents and schools are struggling to manage this swift rise in vaping, with fears children are addicted and harming their health.

Next week, [#4Corners](#) investigates the explosion in vaping amongst young Australians and the booming black market for e-cigarettes. pic.twitter.com/ebWqZiGDUT

— Four Corners (@4corners) [June 23, 2022](#)

In contrast, very limited research about Australian teen vaping has been published, until today.

We have [published](#) in the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* the first results from the [Generation Vape](#) study. The study aims to track teenagers' knowledge, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors about using vapes (e-cigarettes).

Here's what we found about where teenagers were accessing vapes and what types of products they use.

Vaping common, especially in non-smokers

We surveyed more than 700 teenagers 14–17 years old from New South Wales. The sample was closely representative of the population, with key characteristics such as age, gender, location and education monitored throughout [data collection](#).

We found teenagers are readily accessing and using illegal, flavored, disposable vaping products that contain nicotine.

Among the teens surveyed, 32% had ever vaped, at least a few puffs. Of these, more than half (54%) had never previously smoked.

Where are teens getting vapes from?

We found most teens (70%) didn't directly buy the last vape they used. The vast majority (80%) of these got it from their friends.

However, for the 30% who did buy their own vape, close to half (49%) bought it from a friend or another individual, and 31% bought it from a retailer such as a petrol station, tobacconist or convenience store.

Teens also said they bought vapes through social media, at vape stores and via websites.

What products are teens using, and why?

Of the teens who had ever vaped and reported the type of device they used, 86% had used a disposable vape. This confirms anecdotal reports.

These devices appeal to [young people](#) and are easy to use. They do not require refilling (unlike tank-style vaping products) and are activated by inhaling on the mouthpiece.

Disposable vapes can contain hundreds, or even thousands of puffs, and are inexpensive, with illicit vapes from retail stores costing between [\\$20–\\$30, or as little as \\$5 online](#).

There is an enormous range of vape flavors likely to appeal to children—from chewing gum to fruit and soft drink, even desserts. So it is unsurprising teens rated "flavorings and taste" as the most important characteristic of vapes they used.

Disposable vapes often contain very [high concentrations of nicotine](#), even those claiming to be nicotine-free. The way these products [are made](#) (using nicotine salts rather than the free-base nicotine you'd find in cigarettes) allows manufacturers to increase the nicotine concentration without causing throat irritation.

In our study, over half (53%) of the teens who had ever vaped said they had used a vape containing nicotine. Many, however, were unsure whether they had used a vape containing nicotine (27%).

All vaping products, irrespective of nicotine content, [are illegal](#) to sell to under 18s in Australia.

Today, disposable vapes containing [nicotine](#) can only be legally sold in Australia by pharmacies to adult users with a valid prescription.

We need to end illegal imports and sales

Our results emphasize that teen vaping is increasingly normalized, and the most popular devices are designed to be highly appealing to young people. This is despite product manufacturers and proponents claiming they are smoking cessation aids only for adult smokers who are struggling to quit.

Turning the tide on teen vaping requires strong and immediate policy action, including ending the illicit importation and sale of vaping products.

[Education](#) is often the default first action to address unhealthy behaviors in young people. However, unless this is coupled with strong, supportive policy action, this approach is unlikely to have any measurable impact. Education campaigns cannot protect young people from an industry that so freely disregards laws meant to protect health.

We have [strong evidence](#) that vaping leads to harms such as poisoning, injuries, burns, toxicity, addiction and lung injury. The odds of becoming a smoker is more than three times higher for never-smokers who vape than for never-smokers who don't vape.

What's next?

This study uses data from the first wave of the Generation Vape research project, a three-year study with Australian teenagers, young adults, parents and guardians of teenagers, and secondary school teachers.

Future waves of this repeat cross-sectional study, coupled with in-depth interviews, will allow us to track and monitor changes to adolescent, young adult, teacher, and parent attitudes, perceptions, and knowledge of [vaping](#) over time.

Vaping is a rapidly evolving public health crisis in Australia. Our research provides evidence for concerted policy action to prevent young people from accessing harmful and addictive products.

Failure to act will see a whole new generation of Australians addicted to dangerous products.

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